

PLAYING (WITH) GESTIC DOLLS IN *MABOU MINES DOLLHOUSE*

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- 268** To nineteenth-century audiences and critics, Nora's final action in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll House*¹ was characterized as the "door slam heard around the world"; its echoes reverberate over the 130 years since its theatrical debut in 1879 across numerous cultural lines as this special issue of the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* attests. In the nineteenth century, Ibsen's decision to have Nora close the door and leave her husband and children shocked the sensibilities of its audience at the time, but its "shock value" has since declined in contemporary western contexts where divorce rates are at an all time high at close to forty percent² and where women's participation in the public sphere is greater now than it was in Ibsen's time period. Still *A Doll House* remains an enduringly popular play; however, for theatre practitioners who stage Ibsen's iconic play the question always emerges of how to re-imagine Nora's historic door slam in a way that continues its revolutionary legacy and speaks to the very different limitations and conditions of being a woman in society today. The 2003 production by Mabou Mines, co-created by avant-garde theatre artists Lee Breuer and Maud Mitchell, is one such revolutionary re-imagining of Ibsen's *A Doll House* that critiques patriarchal power inherent in the system of commodity consumption in today's society. Emphasizing the doll as an object of consumption and a powerful performative motif, *Mabou Mines DollHouse*³ (hereafter *DollHouse*) adapts Ibsen's work and re-captures the "shock effect" of the original through visual contrast. All the male roles are "doll-sized," cast with little people no more than four feet tall. The female roles are cast by actresses who stand close to six feet tall. In casting so, Breuer inverts the scale-to-power ratio illustrating the absurdity of the power imbalance between tiny men and the women who physically tower over them. The characters inhabit a dollhouse that is built to fit the men, forcing the women to contort their bodies to fit through doors and into the cramped stage space. By shifting

the doll's role in Ibsen's play from a figurative trope to a physical presence, *DollHouse* performatively critiques the symbolic and formative function of the doll to shape and structure contemporary social constructions of women in patriarchal society. Breuer and Mitchell's production makes specific use of Brechtian theatre techniques of historicization, estrangement and *gestus* on the one hand to deconstruct commodified objects, specifically, the doll as a tool of patriarchy to limit a woman's agency, and, on the other, to perform them with new, subversive understandings.

At a post-performance talkback, Breuer and Mitchell remarked that their interest in the play was sparked after having been in contact with an Ibsen scholar who informed them that *A Doll House* was directed mostly by men. Breuer and Mitchell struggled to deal with the play's underlying universal or gender-neutral humanism for, as Ibsen scholar Joan Templeton argues, Ibsen himself "never meant to write a play about the topical subject of women's rights; Nora's conflict represents something other than, or something more than a woman's" (110). Nora is often anachronistically read as a feminist figure, but Ibsen's stated intention was to examine the repressive conditions that limit an individual's self-fulfillment, a recurring theme in a number of his plays.⁴ Although he disavowed any feminist or suffrage motivations, Ibsen interestingly used a marginalized female figure (Nora) as his main character to critique the patriarchal values of nineteenth-century society by illustrating how a woman's agency is severely limited by "father figures" (first by Nora's father and then by Nora's husband Torvald). Templeton too notes how Nora is severely limited by her social conditioning:

Patriarchy's socialization of women into servicing creatures is the major accusation in Nora's painful account to Torvald of how first her father, and then he, used her for their amusement...how she had no right to think for herself, only the duty to accept their opinions. Excluded from meaning anything, Nora has never been subject, only object. (Templeton 142)

Acknowledging that Ibsen's intent was not to create a "feminist" work, Breuer recognized that *A Doll House* had nevertheless turned into something of a feminist "anthem", or what he deemed the "Marseillaise of feminism" and that the figure of Nora became analogous to Eugene Delacroix's painting "Liberty Leading the People" (Talkback 1 Feb 2007). Similar to Ibsen's representation of Nora, Delacroix co-opts the female figure "Liberty" to represent a struggle for "liberté, égalité, et fraternité" within a larger humanistic representational economy. Both Nora and "Liberty" become signifiers for larger social causes, which level out the strictures that women experience in society as a result of their sex.

THE HOUSE NORA BUILT: STAGING A LITERAL DOLL'S HOUSE

270 Establishing the literal and figurative world of the dollhouse in which Nora lives, the scenographic design incorporates aspects of Brechtian *gestus* and estrangement. *Gestus* is a gesture, word, action or tableau that either separately, or in a series makes, visible the social attitudes encoded in the play text. *Verfremdungseffekt*, the “alienation effect”, or more accurately the estrangement effect, is the process in which a subject is recognizable, but made unfamiliar. Brecht illustrates this effect by asking someone on the street: “Have you ever really looked carefully at your watch?” (Brecht 144). The individual immediately examines his/her watch in such a way that creates a critical gaze, which in turn prompts a closer evaluation of known relations about the item. To obtain a critical distance in representing a character the actor, rather than identify with a character, produces a citation that “quotes” or demonstrates a character’s behaviour. The use of Brechtian techniques in the scenographic elements illustrates two key points: first, how an object of consumption, such as the dollhouse, shapes the behaviour of the women who possess it and in this case symbolically and literally inhabit it; and second, Nora’s profound complicity in her objectification. In *DollHouse*, Breuer uses estrangement to great effect in the inversion of social/patriarchal power and physical scale. The nearly six-feet-tall women tower over the men, yet the men exert their power over the women. The size differential provides a contradiction in which the scale that is associated with power becomes unfamiliar, but does so in a way that allows for a closer reading of the power dynamic within the larger context of social relations.

The dramatic visual contrast between the men and women plays out in the material staging of the production. The opening scene illustrates how designer Narelle Sissons incorporated and used Brechtian elements into the set design. The pre-show setting shows a stripped set, revealing the wings, the lights and the technology of the stage. There is even a stage-hand’s broom on stage. Scenery flats lay on the ground and boxes of props sit in full view of the audience. Risers are visible against the back wall of the stage. A piano keyboard sits at the lip of stage left and the top extends onto stage left providing a slight rise. Breuer estranges the audience from traditional conventions of the stage by revealing the technical “behind the scenes magic” of the production in a way that allows, before any actions occur on stage, a consideration of the “constructed-ness” of theatrical experience. As the pianist enters the stage, bows, takes her place at the piano and begins to play, lush red curtains begin to fall around the stage, covering the raw materials of theatrical production and shrouding the scene within the frame of theatrical convention. Breuer, however, wrenches the audience from convention and chooses to aggressively expose and parody Ibsen’s own metatheatricality.

Breuer stages Nora's world as a surreal but literal dollhouse that she and the other female characters have outgrown. The opening sequence shows Nora opening the life-sized dollhouse, furniture, and accessories as Christmas gifts to her children. With the help of her maid, Nora constructs the dollhouse on stage, piece by piece, setting up miniature furniture, unfolding the walls of the dollhouse set; objects that become barriers and obstacles to which they must physically adapt. The dollhouse set estranges performers and viewers alike, for it produces what sociologist Arthur Frank describes as the "mirroring body," a process of embodying the consumer-object and its normative understandings. The dollhouse, a *gestic* symbolic of the patriarchal order, is built to accommodate the male actors. The female performers who stand close to six feet tall must adapt to fit into the order by crawling through the doors, perching over the walls, and awkwardly sitting in child-sized furniture, all of which are constructed to scale for the male actors. With the staging of Nora building her dollhouse, the audience witnesses the consequences of Nora's complicity with male authority: she circumscribes—and takes pleasure in—the very boundaries in which she and other women are physically and socially constrained. 271

PERFORMING DOLLS/PERFORMING NORA

While changes have occurred for women within Western society (with gains in social equality and opportunity) since the nineteenth century, Breuer and Mitchell's *DollHouse* points to the ways in which contemporary consumerism now frames, and poses limitations for, female subjectivity. Breuer and Mitchell draw connections between today's consumerism—an insidious system by which a woman's agency is limited and controlled—and the historical traces of women's oppression. As Frank notes, consumption creates bodies, and in this case women's bodies in particular, that actively mirror the object of consumption in order to assimilate the object to self-image and self-image to the object. I view Mitchell's performance of Nora in *DollHouse* as a critique of consumer capitalism in the ways that Nora integrates herself with the doll-object, which operates as a model for social behaviour and self-image, thereby becoming a passive object. Building upon Frank's work, Chris Shilling sees the act of material consumption as the ways in which the body constitutes and regulates itself in the process of mirroring what is available to be consumed and in continually producing superficial desires through consumption (Shilling 84). Mirroring regulates the body, "as the body sees the object it immediately aligns itself in some fit with that object; its desire is to make the object part of its image of itself" (Frank 62). In the case of *DollHouse*, Nora mirrors the doll she carries: both Nora and the doll are dressed in identical pretty blue gowns exposing a striking *décolleté*, their hair styled in lush, cascading, blond curls. The doll is not only a model of conventional, likely male-oriented femininity, but also a troubling regulatory model for Nora's performance as a woman in society. The doll is a passive object, which Nora,

as a consumer, conforms to in a process of self-objectification. By becoming a passive doll-object for her husband Torvald to act upon, Nora intentionally performs as his subordinate, capitulating to patriarchal power. Nora becomes an object upon which Torvald's desires can be re-played as she performs the signs of consumer-driven femininity, fluttering around with tiny, doll-like steps and twittering her lines in a girlish/infantilized falsetto, sing-song Norwegian accent. Mitchell embodies "Nora" as her husband Torvald's "little songbird" quite literally and often with comic outcomes as her mincing actions and child-like deference to her very short husband ridiculously contrasts with her "Amazonian" stature.

272 In mirroring the doll, Mitchell illustrates how dolls are gender-coded playthings that socialize children, specifically girls, by instilling particular traits of gender identity as well as inculcating social structures of the adult world. In their study on childhood play, John G. Richardson and Carl H. Simpson demonstrate a causal link between gendered play patterns and adult life patterns. Citing studies linking children's exposure and gendered play with toys to cognitive development, Richardson and Simpson argue that playing with gendered toys is "a factor reducing the life choices of girls" (430). Moreover, Richardson and Simpson suggest that girls who play with gender-specific toys are socialized to perform a certain way in the adult, and invariably a patriarchal, order. Thus gender-specific play with dolls is just another means by which a girl is "girded", a process that, as Judith Butler asserts, begins at the moment of birth when naming the baby "a girl" thereby mobilizing her social identity ("Critically Queer" 22-3). S. Weitz claims that toys constructed for boys "are more demanding in design, engaging active and creative interactions" while toys for girls are "passive and less demanding" (qtd. in Richardson and Simpson 430). Playing with passive toys like dolls then conditions girls to enact a particularly limited understanding of "femaleness." In *DollHouse*, the doll that Nora carries not only becomes a model for her role in the household, but also shapes her performance of femininity in society.

A 1990s flyer published by the toy company Fisher-Price illustrates the potential for gender-coded playthings to socialize girls as future homemakers:

It's Great to be a Girl! Little girls love to play with dollhouses...It's their way of learning about who they are and who they might be someday! Your little girl can...collect a dollhouse family just like her own...Making decisions about what kind of furniture she likes and where it should go puts your little girl in control...The road to imaginative fun and adventure is just ahead...recreating the familiar-like running errands around town...Make her house a home with lots of Loving Family accessories (qtd. in Lamb and Brown 213).

Domesticity is phrased in the excerpt as manifest destiny: little girls who play with Fisher-Price Loving Family toys supposedly "learn who they are," unveiling a homemaker identity that purportedly lies latent until they "play" at being home-makers. The text-based advertisement is clearly targeted towards parents who have the means

and the purchasing power to procure such items for their children allowing them to become consumers by proxy.

The passing of consumerism from parent to child occurs at the beginning of *DollHouse* as Nora enters her home with Christmas gifts for her children. “But come over here” she beckons Torvald, “I want to show you all the things I’ve bought. And so cheap! Look, some new clothes for Ivar...and a little sword. There’s a horse and a trumpet for Bob. And a doll and a doll’s cot for Emmy” (Ibsen 3). The doll Nora purchases uncannily resembles both herself and her daughter, with curly blond hair and a matching blue gown. Dramaturgically this reinforces the mirroring processes in consumption and exposes the legacy being passed down to Nora’s daughter. The playthings that Nora brings into the household bear implicit social and gender coding that will shape and structure the lived experience of her children Ivar, Bob, and Emmy. Perpetuating a cycle of patriarchal oppression for her daughter, Nora re-inscribes the consumption model of representation by recreating the same conditions that shaped her childhood as “Daddy’s doll child” (Ibsen 80). As an object of consumption, the doll Nora purchases for her daughter becomes a model normatively prescribing a woman’s lived experience within society.

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Mitchell’s performance of a doll-like Nora resonates through Brecht’s techniques to develop a feminist theatre practice that critiques the social limitations of women inculcated via consumerism and embodied in everyday life. In particular, Nora’s stage characterization employs Brechtian *gestus*. *Gestus* is not just a miming of social relations, but an interpretation, performed with a specific attitude that allows the spectator to reconsider social constructs. Breuer and Mitchell make use of *gestic* actions and costumes in Mitchell’s characterization of Nora in three main ways: 1) to historicize the performative nature of a limiting, heteronormative femininity; 2) to metatheatrically comment upon and analyse the representation of the female body on the stage; and, 3) to critique the processes of consumption and the role of consumer items, specifically the doll, in the regulation of a woman’s agency and subjectivity.

In the first mode, Brechtian *gestus* helps illustrate Butler’s contention that gender is, at heart, performative. As she writes in *Gender Trouble*, “there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender;...identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (25). Mitchell caricatures the physical traits of so-called femininity, costuming herself as Nora in a highly feminized blue gown that displays her ample bust, corseted waist, and bustled skirt emphasizing the highly coveted and highly artificial “hour-glass” female figure marketed towards both women and men as an object of (male) desire. As well, throughout the production Mitchell performs specific social *gestus* in each scene that points to certain aspects of a constructed femininity: fainting in distress, flitting about, speaking with a falsetto doll-like voice, and groveling before Torvald. Mitchell’s parody of an historicized and traditional understanding of gender eludes the reification of such gender norms by revealing the comic absurdity of such a hyper-feminine configuration. Although Mitchell cites historical nineteenth-century gender performances

such as fainting and docility towards one's husband, the effect of a Brechtian sense of historicization, which "in addition to pointing out historically significant forces and relationships at work in the past...is of course intended to suggest the continued impact of the dramatized conditions in other historical periods" (Laughlin 219). Mitchell's performance draws out the contiguities between the historical and contemporary gender performance. Breuer's use of Brechtian historicization illustrates that social relations are viewed as a part of a moving dialectic, showing the ways in which present social arrangements and institutions are historically determined, transitory, and subject to change. In "Brecht and the American Feminist" Karen Laughlin notes, "The argument for the 'historicizing' of dramatic events has aided women eager to reclaim and re-examine history from a woman's perspective while at the same time revealing the social and political forces at work in shaping women's destinies" (214). As such, this technique becomes a useful tool for feminist theory grounded in discourses and representations of the female body: if the body is seen as culturally constituted, its gender socially inscribed, then historicization allows the body to be a site of change.

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Secondly, social *gestus* can be seen in how Mitchell uses metatheatrical elements to create slippages in or break her normatively constructed femininity, drawing the audience's attention to the fact that they are watching a play and that she is performing a role on stage. Mitchell breaks the fourth wall⁵—and the illusion of watching a self-contained "reality" on the stage—by establishing contact with her audience through winks, acknowledging and speaking to individuals in the audience, and the sudden and sporadic loss of her "Norwegian" accent. Mitchell often breaks from her character by directly addressing the audience with her natural voice that is much lower and more resonant than the breathy, "girlish" falsetto she uses for her Nora character. Brecht describes this *gestic* process as the way an artist's "performance becomes a discussion (about social conditions) with the audience he is addressing" thereby prompting the spectator to contemplate the conditions (139). The audience begins to see that gender, like the character that Mitchell plays, is just another form of performance that is guided by certain rules and codes. Mitchell's winks and nudges—her "falling-out" of character so to speak—are a form of social *gestus*, or in other words, a form of anti-characterization that ruptures the relationship between the female body and patriarchal discourse. This anti-characterization, or what I call the fracturing of "unity of a character", undermines the illusion of reality in naturalistic acting⁶ where a character is viewed as static and where social processes are seen as natural and deterministic. Despite the naturalist illusion of appearing "whole" or complete, a character, like most individuals in society, is not a fixed or determined entity but fractured into a number of dialectically shifting subject positions.

By employing Brechtian techniques (direct address, winking, and "falling-out" of character) an actress, as Elin Diamond notes, loses the appearance of a self-contained "whole" in which the character is seamlessly laminated onto body in a one to one relationship. The effect of an historicized body illustrates that the body is not a fixed

essence but a site of struggle and change. Diamond asserts that:

The body, particularly the female body, by virtue of entering the stage space, enters representation—it is not just there, a live, unmediated presence, but rather (1) a signifying element in a dramatic fiction; (2) a part of a theatrical sign system whose conventions of gesturing, voicing, and impersonating are referents for both performer and audience; and (3) a sign in a system governed by a particular apparatus, usually owned and operated by men for the pleasure of a viewing public whose major wage earners are male (89).

Throughout the performance, the audience's focus vacillates between differing orders of representation: the female body (defined by a set of social norms of performance), the actor (Mitchell's own body), and the character (Nora) which creates an effect of "looking-at-being-looked-at-ness." Diamond sees *gestus* as a dialectic between the Actor/Subject, Character, and Spectator in which the spectator may measure her/himself against new formulations of historicized gender. This approach is designed to resist co-optation of the female character into a patriarchal order and to displace the voyeuristic "male gaze," conceptualized by Laura Mulvey as a way of seeing—formalized by cinematography, mise-en-scene, plot—that is shared between actors and spectators of both genders. Mitchell's "looking-back" not only serves to confront the gaze of the audience and shift their engagement from being passive voyeurs towards active "critics," but also analyses the female figure from within representation while disrupting its perceived stability.

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The third way Mitchell uses *gestic* action is in the parallels between Nora's object position and the role of the doll as an object to fulfill desire. An excellent example of the relationship between commodification and the regulation of a woman's body occurs in the scene where Nora begs Torvald for money. In this scene, Mitchell slowly sinks to her knees on the stage and continues diminishing her six foot stature, almost to the point of prostration, until she is below the eye level of Mark Povenelli, who plays Torvald. Torvald pulls out a banknote and holds it out for Nora, but places it just out of her reach, toying with Nora. This power "play" is rendered ridiculous as the Mitchell's arm-span could easily have snatched the bill, yet she "acts" smaller to uphold Torvald's authority. Eventually, Povenelli's Torvald places the bill between his lips and, as if this is a familiar "game" between them, Mitchell as Nora crawls on her hands and knees towards Torvald and plucks the money from between his lips with her own. Mitchell's actions allow the audience to consider Nora's object-value to Torvald as something that reinforces his erotic and formal power within the bourgeois household. Torvald controls the game that Nora must play for his amusement.

While the doll as an object of consumption can reinforce particular ways of being a woman in society, there is opportunity for agency by emptying the doll of its referential potential and mobilizing alternative and subversive performances of the doll that fall outside of normative understandings of femininity. Though Frank does not specifically address the question agency within consumerism, he opens up possibilities for a form of agency that examines, questions, and subverts discourses by reinstating

the corporeality of the body. Frank concedes that “bodies, of course, do not emerge out of discourses and institutions; they emerge out of other bodies, specifically women’s bodies” (49). Reinforcing the notion that the body exists among discourses and institutions, I see the potential of the body’s physicality to perform slippages in or in excess of the systems of representation that surround it. The body exists both as something beyond the boundaries of language, image, and even the semiotic space of the theatre, and as something conditioned by external discourses. People construct and use their bodies, though not in conditions of their own choosing and not independent from the ideologies that overlay their constructions (Frank 47). Consumption as a social practice provides normative parameters of how the body can understand itself, yet these parameters are not fixed limits but fluid resources that open up the avenues for variation and improvisation (Frank 48-9).

276 Mitchell capitalizes on the potential for variation and improvisation by using the doll to undermine its own heteronormative gender coding. Mitchell, as Nora, shows subversive playfulness by using the doll’s head, in *gestic* fashion, to hide her favourite, but forbidden, snack of macaroons from the watchful eye of her disapproving husband. The doll’s secret hiding spot opens up a performative space in which Nora asserts her own sensual desires independently from her husband. As Nora shoves the contraband treat into her mouth behind his back, Torvald accuses her, “Didn’t [you] go nibbling on a macaroon or two?” Nora replies, “I would never dream of doing anything you didn’t want me to” (Ibsen 5). I would also suggest that Nora uses macaroons as a substitute for sex, filling a void that her husband cannot satisfy. After the Helmers come home from the dance, Torvald is wracked with desire for Nora. Povenelli as Torvald pins Mitchell’s Nora to the bed onstage tearing at her corset strings as she spurns him, “No! No! I don’t want to!” To which he snarls, “Don’t want to? I’m your husband!” (*Mabou Mines DollHouse* 1 Feb 2007). Nora realizes that her value is in being an object to satisfy her husband’s desires regardless of what her desires are. Performing an alternative understanding of the doll creates fissures and ruptures in the object-consumption model of femininity and enables Nora to transgress Torvald’s law in the home and fulfill her own sensual and sexual desire.

The ambivalent nature of the doll to regulate femininity is also reflected in Nora’s refusal of complete docility. Under the thin veneer of her consumer-driven femininity and obedience to Torvald lurks Nora’s “secret”—and criminal—act of agency in which she forged her father’s signature for a loan and used the money to go south and “save” Torvald’s life. As a woman in the nineteenth century, Nora had no access to a loan without a man’s signature. Ibsen’s *A Doll House* closely resembles the actual circumstances of Laura Kieler’s life, who was one of his acquaintances. Ibsen was a mentor to Kieler, who would send him manuscripts for his opinion and advice. In 1876 Kieler borrowed money to take her husband, diagnosed with tuberculosis, to Italy to “save his life” (Hanssen “Facts about *A Doll’s House*”). She soon ran afoul of her creditors and—as Nora did in the play—committed forgery to obtain funds. Upon her husband’s discovery of the forgery, he demanded a divorce, took her children

away, and committed her to a mental asylum (ibid). Nora's subversive performance grants her greater agency than she would otherwise have had access to, but that is all hidden beneath the façade of the perfect housewife that Torvald imagines her to be.

The so-called "door slam" scene of *DollHouse* centres on Nora's physical and social rejection of her doll-like object status, suggesting the possibility to develop greater agency and a subversive female subject-position. Evoking the image of a Valkyrie, Mitchell as Nora sings an operatic aria: "Our house has never been anything but a play-room. I have been your doll wife, just as at home I was Daddy's doll child" (*Mabou Mines DollHouse* 1 Feb 2007). At the climax of the scene, the operatic music swells as Nora cries "I could tear myself to pieces" and strips herself of her doll-like trappings, tearing her dress off her body and pulling off her beautiful blonde curls, until she appears bald and nude. This act not only rejects the physical representations of the construction of her identity, but also becomes a powerful critique as she pulls apart both her discursive and symbolic "doll" body. The removal of clothing is a Brechtian *gestus* that reveals how Nora's identity and world view are shaped by the social, economic, and political situation in which she finds herself, and to which she willingly turned a blind eye. Divested of all outward signs of consumer-driven femininity, Nora becomes conscious of the means of her objectification. This "door slam" is revolutionary not because Nora leaves her husband, but rather for representing Nora's potential for change. The scene stages the process of Nora's growing self-awareness of the heteronormative, patriarchal modes of representing the/her female body. Mitchell notes that it is necessary for Nora to divest herself of her doll trappings in order to begin again, to remove the culturally coded articles of heteronormative femininity. Her stripped and bald form borders on androgynous and the audience is left without many of the sartorial referents of "femaleness". This *gestic* action illustrates and performatively critiques the construction of femaleness and patriarchal power. Moreover, Nora illustrates the potential for transformation from a doll-like, object-position towards an active subject-position by developing self-awareness of the effects that a discourse of consumption has on determining her body's social construction. At this point, the system of consumption becomes less of a regulatory force because its physical modes of representation are challenged, thus opening ways of improvising alternative modes of performing "woman" in society.

Breuer underscores Nora's moment of change with a dramaturgical shift in style from melodrama to opera and mirrors the action on stage with a wall of toy puppets that represent Nora and Torvald. Moreover, the dramaturgical change acts as a Brechtian estrangement technique for the audience who must now adjust from one genre to another. Moving away from a realistic or naturalist approach, Breuer's over-the-top style parodies the mythological and iconic aspects of Nora's character, creating a refreshing and new look at this "feminist" hero. Performing the piece as melodrama, only to be upstaged in the final scene by using opera, is a performative trope reflecting the magnitude of Nora's emotional and earth-shattering revelation. The actions in the final scenes of the performance illustrate the power of the *gestus*

for a feminist critique of a patriarchal social order. As Nora realizes the shallowness of Torvald's love for her after discovering her fraud, she exits the stage. Mitchell as Nora re-enters in an opera box on stage left and Povinelli's Torvald, stands at centre stage. Both actors have changed from their nineteenth-century costumes of the petit-bourgeois into togas, appearing as figures from classical opera. At this point the red curtains that had enveloped the stage are now drawn back revealing numerous half-scale opera boxes with Torvald and Nora puppets replicating the action and dialogue occurring between the "live" actors of Torvald and Nora. In this instance, I see the logic of consumption turning upon itself as the puppet Nora "dolls" begin mirroring Nora's subversive break from passive object to active subject as she resists Torvald's authority. In a pause in Nora's aria, Torvald walks over to the opera box in which she stands:

Torvald: I would gladly toil day and night for you, Nora, enduring all manner of sorrow and distress. But nobody sacrifices his honour for the ones he loves.

278 *Nora:* Hundreds and thousands of women have.

Torvald: You think and talk like a silly child (*Mabou Mines DollHouse* 1 Feb 2007).

At this point the numerous Torvald puppets repeat: "Silly child!" To which the Nora puppets respond: "Thousands of women have done just that." One by one, each Nora puppet leaves her Torvald puppet alone in the opera boxes to the sound of a door slam. Dramaturgically, the repetition of the Nora puppets' departure gives the scene a sense of weight and finality. The dissolution of the *DollHouse* set (the walls fold upon themselves and are removed from the stage) occurs simultaneously with Nora's exit, illustrating the fragility of constructed patriarchal power, and how its very existence depends on her complicit participation.

Using Brechtian techniques to shift the doll's role from a symbolic trope to a material element of performance, Lee Breuer and Maude Mitchell find a novel way to work through the normative implications of a limited, consumer-shaped femininity. *Mabou Mines DollHouse* re-imagines the once revolutionary "door slam" by rejecting the naturalistic staging that Ibsen's domestic drama lends itself. Moving away from a naturalist approach to acting opens up the potential to playfully, and comically, reject static gendered constructions of women inherent in objects produced for their consumption. Moreover, Mabou Mines's use of Brechtian acting short-circuits the audience's ability to be passively absorbed by the illusion of "reality" in theatre. Rather, the audience is kept at an active critical distance, as Mitchell always shows that she is performing a character, Nora, who in the play is also performing ambiguous and unstable notions of woman. As such, the audience can see femininity as performative: a set of physical expressions women perform and that, in turn, also perform women. Breuer and Mitchell re-imagine the revolutionary aspect of Ibsen's work not in the content (Nora leaving her husband), but in its effects on the audience: shocking it out of its passive complicity and mobilizing an actively critical audience

that questions the naturalized ideologies of consumer capitalism that limit a woman's agency today.

PERFORMING (THE DOLL) OUTSIDE THE (TOY) BOX

Barbie's recent celebration of her fiftieth birthday is a fitting occasion for an interrogation of one of the best-selling dolls of all time. Debates rage surrounding the ambiguity and ambivalence of what and how Barbie "means" or "performs" as a structuring device for a girl's subjectivity. Conflicting claims swirl around the iconic toy: she is variously "the quintessential icon of American femininity, a symbol of female liberation, or...an agent of female oppression" (Forman-Brunell 305). Barbie is an ambivalent and ambiguous "role model," holding the potential to perform, and instill, all these possibilities. Barbie has personified the shifting ideals of American femininity as well as perpetuated traditional gender roles. During the last half century, Barbie has had over 125 careers, most recently becoming a television news anchor and a computer engineer. As creator Ruth Handler affirms:

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Barbie has always represented that a woman has choices. Even in her early years, Barbie did not have to settle for only being Ken's girlfriend or an inveterate shopper. She had the clothes, for example, to launch a career as a nurse, a stewardess, a nightclub singer. I believe the choices Barbie represents helped the doll catch on initially, not just with daughters—who would one day make up the first major wave of women in management and professionals—but also with mothers ("History" BarbieMedia.com).

Despite Barbie's seemingly progressive stance on girls' life choices (debuting an Astronaut Barbie in 1965 and later an African American Presidential Candidate Barbie in 2004), her rampant consumerism and devotion to material acquisition (her numerous outfits, matching accessories, and goods for her "Dream Home") often contrasted with popular resistance to commercialization fueled by "women's liberation" (Forman-Brunell 308). Moreover, the "Shopper/Consumer" Barbie is troubling because, as I have already argued in this article, the act of consumption is a means to regulate women's bodies in society. Barbie's material consumption as a shopper reveals society's ambivalence towards female empowerment.

During her *Monster Ball* concert tour American pop singer-songwriter Lady Gaga literally "deconstructs" a Barbie doll as a model for femininity. At her 2011 concert appearance in Atlantic City, a Barbie is thrown onstage during Gaga's performance. Picking Barbie up, Gaga announces to her screaming audience: "she was the source of all my childhood insecurities" ("Lady Gaga Beheads..." youtube). With her hands, Gaga rips Barbie's head from an unnatural body whose anatomical proportions are unachievable by the majority of women by means other than cosmetic surgery.⁷ An expert on body image at King's College, Professor Janet Treasure notes that dolls like Barbie are a part of a wider "culture of thinness" that includes zero-sizing and digitally "touched-up" bodies in magazine advertisements, all of which contribute

to “wider health implications, like an increased risk of eating disorders” (qtd in Winterman). Gaga’s Barbie act(ivism) performs outside the normative understandings of the doll and becomes, I would argue, a Brechtian *gestus* that draws attention to the relationship between female body image and consumer capitalism.

Both Nora’s climactic casting off of her doll-like appearance and Gaga’s dismantling of Barbies are performative rejections and critiques of a consumer-marketed feminine ideal. Foregrounding the doll as a performative motif, Breuer and Mitchell highlight the insidious ways individuals are interpolated through consumer objects. Though objects of consumption like dolls are not neutral, Mitchell’s performance, however, shows that one can perform in excess of the systems of representation imbricated in the doll. Likewise, playful, alternative understandings of the doll-object can be found in everyday performances. Some children perform their own dismantling of particular beauty or gender norms by “giving Barbie a haircut” or reimagining their dolls in more active modes of play rather than treating them as passive object to care for and dress up. Nora slyly uses her doll to undermine her husband’s authority and to find space to fulfill her own desires on her own terms. Performing subversive alternatives to the normative understandings of the doll empowers Nora in a way that enables her to leave the dollhouse and stop playing the doll.

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NOTES

1. Also translated as *A Doll's House*.
2. According to StatsCan, the percentage of marriages expected to end in divorce by the 30th wedding anniversary stands at 38.3% in 2003. Divorce rates also vary depending on the length of time couples have been married, peaking in the first few years of marriage. Equally available for men and women, the grounds for divorce were first established by the Canadian Parliament in 1968 (The Divorce Act).
3. *DollHouse* premiered (November 8, 2003) at St. Ann's Warehouse in New York City, an historical venue known for the production of avant-garde and experimental theatre as well as a multidisciplinary performance site. The production has toured around the world and was performed at Toronto's Harbourfront New World Stages Festival (January 24 to February 4, 2007). The production was filmed live on stage at the King's Theatre in Edinburgh (May 2008).

4. The characters in Ibsen's plays (*Ghosts*, *Hedda Gabler*, *Pillars of Society* to name but a few) live in an atmosphere of social repression, which in turn stifles individual self-realization or fulfillment. For example, in *Ghosts*, Mrs. Alving, oppressed by public opinion, feels forced to maintain the façade of a happy marriage after the passing of her philandering husband. Her concealment of the truth also leads to tragic outcomes for her children.
5. The fourth wall is an established convention of modern realistic theatre in which an imaginary "wall" separates the audience from the action on the stage.
6. Naturalism originated in the 1880-1890s as an aesthetic movement that attempted a "photographic" depiction of reality. The movement is connected to positivist thinking and advocated a very scientific method to view society in a deterministic way (Pavis 236). The naturalist actor must identify with their character on stage and create an illusion of reality through mimetic representation.
7. Known as the "real-life Barbie", Sarah Burge has had approximately £500 000 worth of plastic surgery (Winterman).